

Thomas R. Cook
Sermon #457 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
8:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 16, 2007

“A Different Sort of Shepherd”

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10; Proper 19, Year C

Frankly, I think things might be a lot better if God would simply be a bit more like... well, take me, for example. I'm sure the world would be a better place. I know God would appreciate the Gator's win against the University of Tennessee yesterday, or that things would be better if there was a little leniency shown to the New England Patriots for their recent indiscretion ---well, actually their downright dishonesty--- in filming their opponent's coaching signals, so they could know what the other team was planning to do before they did it. If God were more like me, then maybe the “Red Sox” *and* the “Phillies” would be in the World Series this year. Doughnuts could be a health food, people really would give peace a chance, and churches would be overflowing every Sunday.

How simple it would be if God was just more like us. How much more convenient. What we like, God likes. What we believe, God believes. The people we like, God likes. And the people we don't like, God doesn't like either. We know we would be right, and everybody who agrees with us would be right, and everybody else would be wrong. It's just that the problem is: maybe God isn't always all that much like us.

You know, for thousands of years, people have been co-opting God for their own purposes, using some idea of God to their own advantage. Hey, when God's like you, when God is on your side, you've got it made, even if you made up the rules yourself and decided God would follow them. It's the trap the Pharisees and the scribes fall into this morning in the story from Luke's gospel. To them, Jesus' problem is that he hangs out with the wrong crowd; he cares about the wrong sort of people. They don't practice appropriate religious principles. They don't keep the Law of Moses in adequate fashion. For heaven's sake, Jesus welcomes these sinners! Even shares meals with them. And the Pharisees are quite certain this is against God's will, because, well, because God is like them, don't you know, and the Pharisees don't want anything to do with those sinners!

But Jesus tries to teach us another way. Since the Pharisees believe they know what God is really like, Jesus tells them some tales to set them straight. “Which one of you,” Jesus asks, “having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Well, frankly, Jesus, none of us would do that. What sort of a reckless business plan is that, to jeopardize the entire flock by leaving them alone in the wilderness, because one sheep is too inept to stay safely with the others? Better to secure

the ninety-nine and cut our losses. Or what person, having lost an ordinary coin, one of many, doesn't drop everything, put everything else on hold ---work, school, family--- to look for that coin until it turns up again? Have you ever done that? I know I haven't. And even if I did find the dime that had fallen between the cushions on the couch, I won't be calling you up to have a party, asking you to rejoice with me, because I found it.

But for all that sounds so silly in these stories, they are Jesus' way of telling us what God is really like. That those people the Pharisees think aren't worth giving the time of day are the very people with whom God is most concerned. And that reaching out to those people, serving them, welcoming them, comforting them, calling them to new life, finding those who have been lost, brings more joy to God than does all the righteous posturing of those who are quite sure that they are not lost, have never been lost, the ones who know they are right, because they believe that, somehow, God must be like them.

Am I saying that trying to live a life of righteousness isn't important to God or even pleasing to God? No. What I see in this good news this morning, is that Jesus is teaching the Pharisees, and us, that the righteous life doesn't come at the expense of others. God doesn't love us better, because others are worse than we are. In fact, where others struggle with living a decent life, there you find that relentlessly good shepherd looking out for the lost.

You know what I see in these stories? Boundless compassion. Freedom. The ability to be relieved of the burdens of my prejudices and my anxieties about my own worthiness, because, somehow, God in God's own infinite wisdom, is showing me that compassion, love, openness, even a bit of risky-ness, this is what God is really like, and my living in this way, into God's dream for a compassionate world, is more crucial to the Christian life than always being "right" or with the "right" sort of people.

When you think about it, we say that God came to save *sinners*, so what exactly does that make us, we who believe that God is here to be with us today, in this place, in this community, overjoyed that we have been found? What does it mean that the angels sing now with joy, because we have the audacity, the humility, the wisdom, or even the good fortune to be here this morning, at least bright enough to know we need one another and we need God's forgiveness and grace? At the heart of these parables is the understanding that all of us, at one time or another, are that sheep that has gone astray; we are that coin which falls between the cracks and is lost for a time. But that just means we are human. And it means that God is searching for us, relentlessly, with no less an intention than to forgive our shortcomings and celebrate our being found! Can we, knowing this, accepting this about God, show any less grace or less forgiveness or less compassion to any other? After all, Jesus did not live and die only to reward the good, but to open the kingdom of heaven to all of us who have ever been lost.